

**Pnina G. Abir-Am; Clark A. Elliott (Editors).** *Commemorative Practices in Science: Historical Perspectives on the Politics of Collective Memory.* (Osiris, 2nd Series, 14.) xii + 383 pp., illus., tables, apps., index. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. \$39.

This is a timely and important collection of essays. The editors have divided them into three parts: "Commemorating Great Minds: Scientists as Cultural Histories" (with contributions from Owen Gingerich, Christiane Sinding, Joy Harvey, Daniela S. Barberis, George E. Haddad, and Dieter Hoffmann); "Commemorating Scientific Institutions: The Re/Production Sites of Scientific Progress" (with contributions from Clark A. Elliott, Stanley Goldberg, Robert W. Seidel, and Dominique Pestre); and "Commemorating Scientific Disciplines; Memorializing Objectivity" (with essays by Liliane Beaulieu, Mara Beller, Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis, and Pnina G. Abir-Am, who also contributed an introduction to this book). The gist of these wide-ranging essays is summarized in Charles S. Maier's preface. "The history of commemoration," he writes, "in science as in war or politics or artistic endeavor, tells us far more than the commemorators ever wanted to disclose" (p. xii). This volume, in short, addresses the tensions between history and memory and provides numerous case studies that will interest historians of science and cultural historians more generally.

Of the many commemorations featured in this book—including celebrations of Max Planck, Claude Bernard and Louis Pasteur, Copernicus, Robert Koch, and Jean-Martin Charcot and anniversaries of Harvard University, the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima/Nagasaki, the Lawrence

Berkeley and Los Alamos National Laboratories, and the Centre Europeen de Recherche Nucleaire—those organized by the Bourbaki group of mostly French mathematicians, the Bohr Institute for Theoretical Physics, American and French microbiologists, and the University of Chicago to celebrate the Darwin centennial are especially revealing. Not many historians, I suspect, are aware of the *Journal of Jocular Physics*, issued by Niels Bohr's students and colleagues on the occasion of his birthdays to provide a measure of comic relief from Bohr's towering presence. But as Mara Beller makes clear, this journal hints at possibilities for opening "analysis of humor in scientific discourse" (p. 272). Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis's insightful examination of the Darwin centennial hosted by the University of Chicago calls attention to the unintended and unforeseen consequences of commemorative events—in this case, the way the Darwin festivities fomented a backlash that would cohere into the movement known as scientific creationism.

By highlighting these pieces, I do not mean to imply that the other essays should be ignored. To the contrary; they are, on the whole, well researched and nicely conceptualized in light of recent scholarship on the frequent collisions between history and memory. What historians of science will find most interesting about this volume, beyond its substantive contributions to their own fields of specialization, is the attention it gives to the involvement, or noninvolvement, or marginal(ized) involvement, of historians of science in commemorative practices. Robert W. Seidel's contribution on the anniversaries of the Lawrence Berkeley and Los Alamos National Laboratories is a case in point. Seidel notes that, because of his involvement with both institutions as a historian and museum administrator, he was enlisted to assist with their golden anniversary celebrations. Without reading too much between the lines, it is safe to say that, despite his efforts and those of other historians, history took a back seat to selective memory (and willful distortion?) in both commemorations.

Is that inevitable? Will selective memory trump history when commemorative practice is at stake? If so, what are historians of science to do? Get involved in helping the planners of commemorative events? Refuse to participate because we will be co-opted or ignored? This volume was not written as an advice manual. But interested readers will come away with the strong impression that, when it comes to the commemorative practice of science, historians of science might need to rethink the terms of their involvement. Perhaps one way to begin would be to shift our attention from the practice to the experience of science.

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